THE HONOR OF VALDI

BY

ELEANOR M. INGRAM.

THE man walking up the quay of the island raised his finger for silence, as the rich, colorful voice floated out across the evening air.

"Music, and a love song!" he exclaimed, with a mockery not wholly pleasant. "Truly, the man has a light heart who sings in a prison."

"That is no prisoner who sings," corrected his companion, the warden.

"Who, then? One of the guards?"

The warden permitted himself a dry smile.

"I will tell you, messere, that Rocca Grigia is no longer a prison colony, but a love nest. That is the governor who sings."

"To?"

"His lady wife. She is a cousin of the duke; so angry was he at their marriage that he exiled them here. Are you of Belfiore, and do not know that story?"

"Perhaps. Does the Prince di Valdi make a wise governor?"

"He has too wise a warden to gossip of him, messere. He is obstinate enough, but marvelous kindly."

Something in the tone brought a quick, sardonic interchange of glances between the two men. In the pause that followed, a girl's voice took up a grave, measured melody:

Ave Maria.
On happy sea and land and sky,
There falls the benediction of thy smile.
O'er earth's warm cheek glad rosy colors fly,
Feeling thy loving tenderness the while.
Ave Maria.

A bell from the prison chapel chimed with the last note, sounding vespers. The warden muttered a perfunctory devotion, stopping a moment on the gray stone steps of the building. His companion halted also, but to raise his acute, sneering face in scrutiny of the façade before him. He was still young, but of a pale coloring that gave the effect of fadedness.

"Usher me in, sweet monk," he urged. "I long to see Rufino di Valdi in his patiently borne seclusion."

There were few visitors to the isolated island; this guest had not long to wait for his desire. So unaccustomed were the servants to the duties of reception that he was taken, unannounced, direct to the presence of his hosts, and there left. And so at liberty, he stood for a moment in the shadow of the curtain, to survey the scene before him.

A wide, roomlike balcony, strewn with faded rugs and furnished with a few ancient carved chairs, opened before the guest in the clear sunset. At

the upper end, was placed a broad bench, over which a blue velvet cloak was thrown as tapestry; seated there, his arm around her shoulders, her golden head resting against his sleeve, were Rufino and Clelia di Valdi. The picture was of a flawless repose; the girl's soft face was uplifted and dream-filled, her small, right hand had fallen by her side, still holding the lute, to which she had sung. Her husband gazed down at her with a steady intensity of passion and joy of possession that burned in his dark eyes as an unwavering fire, a fire that did not waste, but warmed.

"Once I knelt in the cathedral, at Belfiore," Clelia said suddenly, her frail voice falling across the sunset hush, "when I shuddered—as one shudders sometimes for no cause. And the good Father Cipriano said that no doubt some evil thing was looking at me. Think you it is always so when one has that feeling, my Rufino?"

"I think no evil thing would dare look at you," Valdi answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I felt the shudder just now," was the simple reply.

It might not have appeared a propitious moment for entry; but the man at the door smiled oddly, and came forward.

"Pardon, signor governor," he deprecated smoothly. "Your servants brought me here, an implorer of your indulgence and hospitality."

Clelia sat up, with a faint cry, her blue eyes flashing wide. Valdi slowly rose, his natural haughtiness of expression heightened by blended anger and surprise.

"My servants are negligent," he returned. "But Rocca Grigia cannot ignore the claims of her rare guests—I know you, *signore?*"

The other bowed. "I had the honor of meeting the Prince di Valdi at the court of Belfiore, six months ago, before his marriage to the Lady Clelia. I am called——"

"Don Mario Russo," Valdi supplied. "Forgive an exile's faulty memory, *signore;* you are welcome. *Signora*"—he turned to his wife—"let me present to you this gentleman."

There was a singular reluctance mingled with the court-bred grace with which Clelia extended her hand for the visitor's salute. The daughter of a reigning house, she did not rise, or, not being so inclined, speak, in spite of her extreme gentleness. But Don Mario's respect accepted all equably.

"We were about to sup," Valdi added. "Will you enter with us? Over the table, we can speak."

"There is much to speak of," said the guest.

It was only of the gossip of Belfiore that he spoke, however, during the meal; of the Duke Guido's last won game in Italian diplomacy, of the Duchess Gemma's little twin sons and their precocious arrogance, and of the court gayeties. And the two exiles listened avidly, even Clelia relaxing to inquire after one friend or another.

"And we?" Valdi at last asked, with abruptness half defiant. "What do they say of us?"

Don Mario fixed his pale gray eyes upon his plate. "Nothing, prince," he admitted. "For a month your marriage was on every tongue; much art it cost the duke to appease Lady Clelia's betrothed and avert a quarrel with Anjou. But now all is forgotten."

"Then we may grow old here," was the sombre deduction.

"Are we not happy?" gently questioned Clelia.

Her husband quickly laid his hand over hers, his dark color rising. "Happy? So happy that I have hours of torture, fearing it will not last! Six months we have been here—in six years will you still be unwearied of me? Clelia, the day I see weariness in your eyes, I step from our balcony's verge into the sea below."

The outburst startled the others into momentary wordlessness.

"I love you," Clelia answered only.

He looked at her steadily, until the ethereal serenity of her expression passed into his. Very slowly, he bent his lips to her fingers, and there was a silence.

After a time, Clelia rose and withdrew, leaving the two men opposite each other in the large, faded room. As if her going had been a signal, there came the ring of metal from the hall, and a servant appeared, ushering in the warden of the prison.

"All is well?" Valdi demanded, as the heavy keys were laid on the table before him.

The official saluted.

"Signor governor, a prisoner from the fourth tier was found to have loosened three bars from his window. In twenty-four hours, he would have been free. I have put him in another cell, and promised him, in your honorable name, fifty lashes at dawn, as the late worshipful governor always ordered."

"You will promise nothing in my name, Lorenzo, a second time," Valdi declared, with chill explicitness, "or it will be you who will receive a lesson. To-morrow you will bring the prisoner before me for trial."

"Signor governor, we found him at work."

"I will hear him. Go!"

When the door had closed behind the sullen man, Don Mario poured himself a goblet of wine.

"Did it ever occur to you, prince, that there might be a spy in your domain?" he wondered. "That the duke might have your proceedings watched?"

"No."

"Yet it is so. The duke has regular reports of all you do here."

Valdi rose impetuously, and took several turns up and down the room, struggling with strong irritation.

"The duke has that right," he finally said. "If he does not trust me, very good. If he is not satisfied, let him remove me from office. But while I am governor, I will govern in my own manner."

"Suppose I tell you that you are reported too lax and indulgent, and you had best let this prisoner take his fifty lashes at dawn? Will you do so?"

"No," snapped Valdi curtly. "I punish no man without trial."

Don Mario smiled, well pleased. "So firm in purpose? Come to your chair, prince, and let us speak openly. This wretched prisoner matters to no one; I only put his case to see how far you submitted to the duke."

"You——"

The guest looked down, playing with the amber goblet. "I am no lover of the Duke Guido. You, Rufino di Valdi, have in your blood an inheritance of hate for the house of Isoletto. Deny it not."

"My wife is of the house of Isoletto."

"One extends no enmity to women. The father of this Duke Guido drove your father to his death and you to poverty. If I had your name, so honored in Belfiore, if I remembered that Guido's strict rule is not loved, and that the people might well set me in his place, I would——"

Valdi had paused beside his seat without resuming it, staring across at his companion. "You would?" he repeated.

Don Mario turned the goblet in his fingers. "The palace at Belfiore is old, prince; old, and hiding strange secrets. In the east wing is a room from which a hidden passage winds between the thick walls, to emerge in the bedchamber of the duke himself. If I were the Prince di Valdi instead of Mario Russo, when I visited the palace I would ask to be allotted the rooms in the east wing. And some night I would arise and find the hidden passage, and—visit my sovereign. Oh, no violence; a few drops of some dainty cordial left in the cup from which he drinks, perhaps. If Guido del Isoletto died, Belfiore would choose a new duke."

The perfect calm of the proposal had the effect of bewildering. Valdi passed his hand across his eyes as if dazzled.

"An invitation to assassinate," he began.

"Pardon, an invitation to a ducal seat."

"Have you forgotten that the duke spared the life I had forfeited by every law?"

"He dared not execute you in Belfiore. And he sent you to this exile—you owe him nothing. Even here his

spies watch you for some slip. It is a question of who strikes first."

Again Valdi turned to pace the room, his dark face burning. "What is your stake in this?" he suddenly demanded.

"Power and wealth. I am poor. With your rise you will lift me."

"Suppose I betray this plan of yours to the duke?"

Don Mario laughed. "Prince, I am a favorite with the duke; he likes and trusts me. If you went to him with this tale, who would believe you, his helpless, humiliated, hereditary enemy, against me? I am safe."

"Helpless, humiliated," echoed Valdi. He sat down in his chair and rested his forehead on his hand. "Yes, you are safe!"

The interlude was long. Don Mario remained mute and watchful. Valdi kept his position unchanged, his face concealed; when at last he spoke, it was without looking up. "There is a flaw in your plan, Don Mario. I am here a captive as much as the prisoners under my rule; how could I visit the palace in Belfiore?"

"You are captive no longer."

"You mean?"

"I am a messenger sent by the duke to recall you and the Princess Clelia to Belfiore. You are to return on the ship which brought me." He drew a packet of letters from his vest and passed them across the table. "Here are my credentials and the command to you."

Stupefied, Valdi raised incredulous eyes. "Recalled?" he exclaimed. "We are recalled? And you kept it secret?"

Don Mario made a soothing gesture. "To test you, prince; to offer first my plan. Now do you see how you can visit the palace and take up your work?"

"My work? Hush, and let me think. Recalled!"

"Think, prince, think. Think how easily I could have carried out the plan alone and put another in the place I offer you. Let us be allies."

Valdi bent his head, his right hand on the letters he had not calmness to read. A strong wind was rising, tossing the curtains and beating windows and doors. In the pause, a more violent gust flung back the door to the inner apartments, and with the rush of air came the sweet gravity of Clelia's voice, from where she sang while putting flowers before her little altar. At the sound, her husband started up, scattering the papers over the floor.

"What do you want of me, tempter to evil?" he cried vehemently. "Must I play with dishonor at your call? What would you have me do?"

"Little," assured Don Mario. "Who speaks of dishonor? Only, when you reach the palace, ask the duke to lodge you in the east wing."

"I wish the ship bringing you had sunk," said Rufino di Valdi. "I wish my wife and I had been left to live and die in exile. But I will do my work."

"That is well," smiled the other.

There was no ceremony or ostentation of welcome, the day when the Prince and Princess di Valdi arrived in Belfiore. But they received a more delicate compliment, for the duke and duchess met them with the simplicity of kinsmen. No one hinted that the governor of Rocca Grigia had been in exile, or that his marriage to Clelia had not been ardently desired.

"Until the old Palazzo Valdi can be repaired and furnished, cousin, you will stay at the palace," the Duke Guido remarked, when the formalities of greeting were over.

They were in one of the splendid marble and filigree rooms, Guido himself a dazzling central figure with his jeweled dress and brilliant handsomeness. As he brushed back his perfumed black curls with white fingers heavy with gems, and smiled at the man opposite, the tales of his cunning diplomacy, perfect ruthlessness to those who opposed him, and uncanny insight into the motives of others, seemed as absurd as if attributed to Clelia or Gemma. But Valdi knew, and in spite of himself, felt his color rise, as he answered:

"My lord, you are pleased to honor us. If I might presume on such favor,

I would ask that we be lodged in the east wing of the palace."

The duke stifled an incipient yawn; it was a drowsy noontide.

"Why the east wing, cousin?" he idly speculated.

"My lord, the other side of the palace holds painful memories for me. In it I lived in the anteroom of death."

"And won the heart of Clelia. The memories might balance. However, have it as you will; who am I to argue with a prejudice? But I warn you that the east wing is a place of legends. There is a tale that a hidden passage runs from the blue room to my own bedchamber, though there is no sign of such a thing. Heard you ever that story?"

Valdi's hand closed so hard on the arm of his chair that the knuckles stood out white through the bronzed flesh.

"I recall some such rumor, my lord," he answered.

"Ah? Well, I do not believe it. Nor am I timid. But I have not yet felicitated you upon your admirable government of Rocca Grigia. Come, I have a confession to make. I was so curious to know what you would do there that I bribed one of your servants to send me account of your proceedings. Curiosity is one of my faults."

This time Valdi's chest heaved with a different emotion, and his eyes met those of Guido.

"You had the right to have me watched, my lord, if you could not trust me," he coldly acknowledged.

"You mistake me," was the smiling correction. "I did not distrust you; I wanted to study your talent in office. Having studied it, I recalled you to Belfiore to give you larger work. Are you content?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Are you not well, cousin? You seem ill at ease."

"I am well, my lord."

Guido stifled a second yawn, gazing pensively out an open window at the white city which called him master, and the conversation lapsed.

The first evening that the Prince di Valdi and his wife spent in the east wing, Don Mario Russo called on them. He found them seated together as at Rocca Grigia, the same love in their faces, but no longer the same peace. A vague trouble clouded Clelia's soft face. Valdi's expression was sombre and agitated.

"I find you well lodged, prince," saluted the guest.

"I was better lodged at Rocca Grigia," was the bitter retort.

Don Mario glanced significantly around the room. "Less conveniently so," he deprecated. "These frescoed panels, that fluted marble—is not that costly mirror yonder well designed to reflect the beauty of a lovely lady?"

From one object named, to the next, Valdi's eyes followed.

"Clelia," he abruptly said, "leave us for a time, sweetheart. I have business to discuss with Don Mario."

The girl rose obediently, curtsied to her husband, and put her hand in his as he stood up to lead her to the door. In her white silk draperies, her pale-gold fairness of beauty gave the effect of a purity unearthly, transcendental. As she moved, her reflection in the long mirror started forward to meet her, so for an instant the room seemed crossed by two silver-bright figures stepping between the two men and separting them.

When Valdi came back, it was to remain standing.

"Is this the room with the door?" he asked harshly.

"Yes, dear prince."

"Show me it."

"Surely, dear prince. But first take this tiny crystal phial. See how the rose-colored cordial glows; cordial? I should say elixir, a cure for gnawing ambitions and weary brains worn by cares of state, a sweet producer of dreamless rest. So, hide it in your vest; you may see some one who needs its aid."

"Show me the door."

"I am about to do so. I would have come sooner, but the duke sent for me to give report of Rocca Grigia as I

found it, and of my impressions of you."

Valdi's head went up.

"You!"

"How could I help his command, prince? Be certain I only told him good of you. The door——"

The painted bracelet on the arm of one frescoed figure was the key. Under Don Mario's fingers something moved, clicking, and on the opposite side of the room the long mirror suddenly turned back into the wall, leaving exposed a narrow, dark passage.

"There is no one in Belfiore who can find that door, except me," said Don Mario, as the mirror swung again into place. "And now, you."

"How did you learn the trick?"

A curious expression flickered across the other's face. "Does that matter, prince? I put the knowledge in your hands, a weapon. And a safe one; to empty this phial into the glass which stands on a table beside his bed each night, to regain this distant room unseen—who could suspect?"

Valdi answered nothing, but never had Clelia seen the steel-hard man who looked at Don Mario.

Life at the court of Belfiore was very pleasant, very gay. Into it the two from Rocca Grigia readily slipped. Clelia spent long hours with the Duchess Gemma and her ladies, Valdi learned to lounge drowsy days away with the insouciant nobles around him.

"Lelio," the duke asked his five-year-old son, one morning in the gardens, "who gave you that golden ball?"

"Francesco, *signore,*" lisped the child, lifting a replica in miniature of Guido's own vivid face.

"Why did your brother give you his toy?"

"Because I wanted it, *signore.*"

"The elder is Lelio, the more loving, Francesco," mused the duke. "One must bend to the other. We can have no household war and feud between them, cousin."

"No, my lord," answered Valdi, from his stand near the other's chair.

"No; I like my house at peace. To save Clelia from widowhood I sacrificed some things, last year. For Anjou insisted absolutely upon my executing you for the kidnapping of Count Ferrand, or delivering you to them for punishment. But I won my point."

Valdi put his hand to his throat, as if the summer air suffocated; his reply was hardly articulate.

"I carried my point," Guido repeated. "But I could not well fail to protect you, cousin, after you had given word to be true officer of mine."

There was an avenue of flowering almond trees debouching opposite. As Guido raised his eyes, concluding, he saw Clelia di Valdi standing at the end of the avenue, the little Count Francesco clinging to her hand as she gazed with doubt-filled, terrified intentness at her husband. Snow pale, snow cold, she watched Valdi's face, until some attractive force slowly drew her blue eyes to meet the duke's ironic regard. No one spoke; Valdi, his eyes lowered, saw nothing. And presently Clelia retreated, step by step, drawing the rosy child with her, until the pink-and-white blossoming branches shut her from view.

"The day grows warm," drawled Guido. "Let us go in, cousin."

Long and late was Valdi's conference with Don Mario Russo, that night. Clelia had long before retired, and had fallen asleep, when her husband came into their chamber. Seeing her so in her childish beauty, Valdi bent over to kiss her. At once she aroused, clasping her soft arms around his neck.

"I dreamed you were gone," she panted. "Rufino, I dreamed you were taken from me. That man—Don Mario——"

"Hush, hush; you dream still."

"No! Why does he follow you? Why have you changed to me?"

"Change to *you!*"

His passionate lips silenced hers, and there was a brief pause.

"Rufino, to-day I saw you with the duke, and he looked, he looked—— Oh, do not anger him! Who are we to stand against Guido del Isoletto? I am afraid—stay with me to-night."

"Beloved, I cannot; I have work."

She flung back her golden head to gaze up at him.

"You leave me alone, as ever since we came here?"

"I must!"

Sighing, she unclasped her arms and sank among the pillows.

"*Maria santissima* guard you. Remember me."

Valdi went back to the room with the door.

In the last hours of the waning night, the great mirror swung suddenly inward. In the hidden passage stood Guido del' Isoletto and looked down at the man, who, wrapped in a velvet cloak, lay asleep on the floor before the mirror door. Very quietly Valdi lay, his dark head resting on his arm, his face calm and still. There had been no sound to awaken him, nor did the duke betray his presence. Once he stooped closer to the sleeper, to verify by the dim taper light that the other's gold-hilted dagger was in its sheath, and rose, smiling oddly.

The space of the visit was not long. When Valdi stirred slightly in his sleep, Guido stepped noiselessly back into the passage, and the door shut.

There was no change in the duke's bearing toward Valdi, during the next two days. But there was a change in Don Mario, who was restless and feverishly impatient for his accomplice to act.

"Why do we wait?" he urged. "We have no time to linger."

Yet, Valdi did linger.

On the second night after the duke's visit, the sleeper lying before the mirror door was awakened by some one stepping across him.

"Hush, prince," warned a strained voice, as he started up. "Make no sound until I close the passage. It is done."

"Done! What is done?" demanded Valdi.

"Your work. Since you lacked will or courage, I myself did it. I have waited in the passage since afternoon; the cup is mixed."

The bound that brought Valdi erect was one with the movement that fitted his bronze fingers to Don Mario's throat.

"You have killed him, you, and the fault mine!" he cried, shaking the man doglike in his passion. "Oh, I have been mad to trifle with you, to try alone to save him."

Choking, Don Mario caught at the other's wrist.

"Loose me—you would have done it——"

"Never, never! I could have killed *you* with a glad heart the first night you proposed treason to me. I could have joyed in sending you to the hangman any hour since. But you said it; who would have believed my word against yours? I hoped to trap you." He flung the man violently from him. "*I* plan to murder Guido, who owe him life? *I* plot to take his place, who am his officer? Yet, through folly, I have done it."

Sent reeling against a chair, Don Mario felt his bruised throat.

"I thought you meant it," he panted. "If not, undo it."

"Undo it?"

"The poison is in the goblet beside him, he will not wake to drink of it before dawn. I will go back and empty the mixture."

The expression that came to Valdi's face was less of relief than of returning life.

"No," he refused sternly. "In the duke's room you go no more; I do not trust you. I myself will empty the goblet."

"Rufino," faltered a silver voice. "Rufino!"

Both men turned, and saw Clelia on the threshold of her chamber, a slender white figure.

Her husband crossed to her, and caught her in his arms.

"Clelia, you heard?"

"A little, only a little. You guard the duke?" She looked shuddering at Don Mario.

Valdi kissed her once, then gently motioned her to go back to her room.

"Wait in there, I will come to you, Clelia."

She obeyed, keeping her shining, trustful eyes on him until the door closed; eyes piteously courageous.

Valdi waited to lay aside his dagger and any ornaments that might ring or tinkle, then went steadily into the darkness of the hidden passage.

The way was very long, with unexpected steps and turns, and of a thick, rayless blackness. When at last a dim light showed the end of the perilous journey, Valdi found himself dazzled.

The large, lofty chamber was faintly illuminated by a single gilded lamp suspended by chains from the ceiling. The furniture cast long shadows, the distant corners of the place were illimitable vistas of uncertainty. But Valdi saw only the table standing by the canopied bed, and a tall, shimmering goblet waiting there. Cautiously, stepping carefully on the marble floor, he advanced toward his object.

The light, even breathing of the sleeping man continued unchanged. Reassured, Valdi went on, until his fingers grasped the goblet's stem, and drew it to him. With an irrepressible sigh of relief, he poured the crimson liquid on the floor, and laid the empty goblet on its side upon the table, as if overturned by accident.

But as he moved to retreat, there was a corresponding movement in the bed, a white hand darted from the brocaded curtains and closed over the hand just leaving the table.

"Wait yet a little, cousin," advised Guido's smooth, ironic tones. "Go not without a word of greeting, pray."

A strong shudder shook Valdi from head to foot, shaking also the hand clasping his. But he made no attempt to escape.

"No, my lord," he answered mechanically.

"Thank you, cousin," the hold was released. "Let us have more light."

The command was promptly obeyed. From the hidden passage issued Don Mario Russo, carrying a lamp, whose light shone strongly on his thin, triumphant face and gleaming eyes.

"You?" exclaimed Valdi, effectually aroused. "You dare come here?"

"Why, yes," the duke observed. "He dares come here. Early in the evening Don Mario came to me with warning of your present visit. Also, he told me how, since he met you at Rocca Grigia, you have not ceased to urge upon him your plan of removing me. He has reminded me of your insistence upon occupying the room where the hidden passage was said to end, of how singular and embarrassed has been your manner with me, and of the old enmity between our houses. And admit your actions confirm him."

Stunned by a treachery so colossal, wound in the net so completely enmeshing him, Valdi stared across at the smiling man with the lamp. What could he say to clear himself, how disprove this thing? Despair swelled in his throat, stifling speech.

"Speak," invited his judge.

But Valdi could not speak. The picture before him was of Clelia; Clelia, who waited for him.

"There is nothing the prince can deny," Don Mario asserted. "Why is he here, if not for evil?"

"To undo your work," retorted Valdi, with difficulty. "As you know well, double traitor. My lord, that man has already poisoned your cup. He tricked me—I tried to save you."

Don Mario laughed. "A feeble tale," he said. "Your highness best knows whether the cup has not been here out of my reach. Why did the prince not tell you if the treason were mine? His word would have convicted poor me."

"A weak defense, truly," agreed the duke. "Have you no better, cousin?"

"It is the truth," Valdi answered hopelessly. "But I was not bred in a subtle court; I am snared. Do as you will with me, my lord."

There was a fatalistic dignity of resignation in the gesture with which he folded his arms and stood waiting. Guido remained silent an instant before replying, lying among his tinted velvets and satins.

"Set down the lamp, Mario Russo," he bade. "What I am about to say, you both, no doubt, anticipate. For the

man who has accepted my kindness to betray it, the officer false to his allegiance, and the friend who plots treason, I have, and can have, no pardon. There will be an execution in the palace at dawn. But because of the high names involved, it shall be secret. Prince, pray ring the bell beside you and summon the officer of my guard."

It was the master of Belfiore who had spoken; unanswerable, not to be contradicted. Valdi at once obeyed, and resumed his attitude of unresisting dignity. Better, infinitely better, for Clelia not to know until afterward.

The sharp ring of steel echoed the silver tinkle of the bell. The door opened with a flare of additional light, a glittering officer advanced three steps and saluted, his men standing rigidly behind him. Evidently he had previously received his orders, for Guido simply nodded.

"Take your prisoner," he signified.

Valdi moved forward, his chest slightly heaving. But not toward him did the soldiers advance. There was a martial stir of movement, and the circle had closed around Don Mario. Amazed, Valdi halted.

"I?" cried the prisoner shrilly. "I?"

The duke rose on his elbow, turning his brilliant, merciless face that way.

"Who else?" he demanded. "My ingenuous kinsman here, perhaps? Come, the play is over, Lorenzo de Cariano. Did you think I could not find you under the name of Mario Russo, as you thought me ignorant of the hidden passages of my own palace? Grow wiser; you are not the man to overthrow me. Oh, it was fairly well devised; you meant to tempt Valdi to poison me, then openly accuse him of it after my death, and, freed from us both, put your brother Paolo back as ruler of Belfiore. And when you saw I was watching you, yesterday, you flung all guilt upon my too-loyal cousin. You have made your throw, and lost. Take him away, Scarpi."

The prisoner would have cried out, but a soldier put a hand over his mouth. There was a movement backward, the officer saluted, and the room was left to silence.

"Go back to Clelia, cousin," smiled Guido, and stifled a yawn.

"My lord, how did you know?" Valdi wondered, his head reeling.

"Why did you sleep armed before the mirror door?" the other countered.

"To guard you, my lord. I feared Mario Russo."

"So I supposed when I saw you there. Moreover, if you had meant to poison me, you would have filled the goblet, not emptied it. You make a wretched defense, cousin, in a good case. Go back to Clelia; good night."

The door closed behind him as he entered the passage, but Valdi paid no heed. Breathless, eager, he was hastening through the darkness—to Clelia.

BARTER OF HEARTS.

WHEN mighty Jove a-wooing went
Of Danae, the fair,
They say a shower of gold he sent—
The maid said yes—right there.

But now the maids on marriage bent
Reverse the old-time tale,
And when the bags of gold are sent,
The gallant knight's "for sale."

STELLA LEERBURGER.